



County of San Bernardino • Human Services System
Department of Public Health
DIVISION OF ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

For more information, please call:
**WATER & WASTEWATER
PROGRAM**
(909) 387-4666

Taking care of your **SEPTIC SYSTEM**

... what you need to know



**San Bernardino County Department of Public Health
DIVISION OF ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH SERVICES**

SAVE THESE IMPORTANT SEPTIC SYSTEM RECORDS!

***R**eading this brochure could save you a lot of money, time and trouble. By learning how to take care of your septic system, you can protect your family's health and the value of your home. You can also protect the environment, including your drinking water, from contamination caused by your septic system.*

Your Address _____

SEPTIC TANK
Installation Date/Size (gallons)

CONTRACTOR
Name/Phone

SEPTIC TANK/SEEPAGE PIT PUMPING

LEACHLINES/SEEPAGE PIT

Installation Dates/Length, Width, Depth of Rock

What is a Septic System?

A septic system is made up of a **septic tank** and a **leachline** or **seepage pit** buried in the ground near your home. This system treats wastewater and sewage from your toilets, showers, washing machines, garbage disposals, kitchens, etc., where public sewer systems are not available.

The **septic tank** is a concrete, fiberglass, polyethylene or steel box about nine feet long and five feet deep and wide. The tank is usually buried about five feet from the house under one to three feet of soil. The **leachline** is a gravel-filled underground trench, whereas a **seepage pit** is a vertical hole in the ground with a concrete block lid and walls that are covered with soil. The pit measures 4-6 feet in diameter and 15-40 feet deep.

Where is my Septic System?

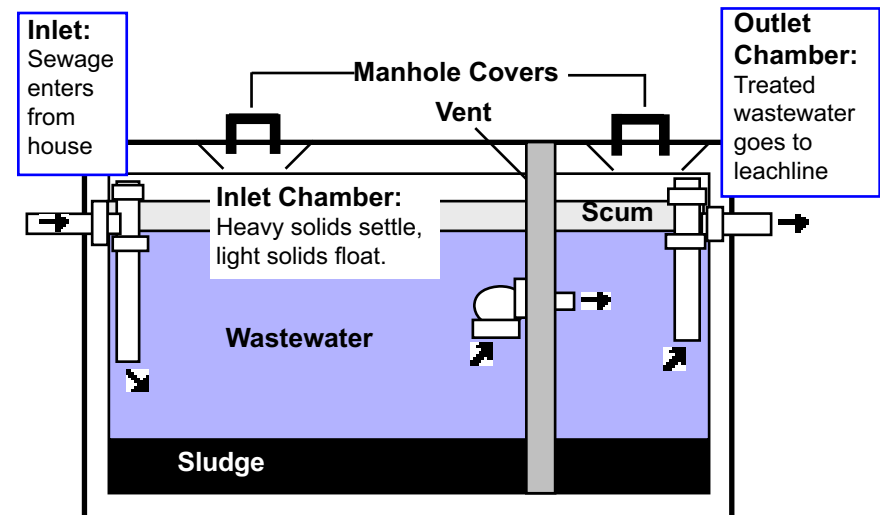
Try to find your septic tank by hitting the ground near your house with a metal rod, such as a crowbar. The tank will act as a drum and make a hollow sound. Draw a diagram below of the manholes, the tank, the leachline and their location to the house. **Keep this diagram for future reference!**

What does a Septic System do?

A septic tank has three main functions: 1) to remove and treat greases and solids in the wastewater; 2) to store greases and solids until they are removed by a professional septic tank pumper; and 3) to slowly release wastewater over an area of land so it can be absorbed by the soil.

Wastewater from your home flows into a two-chamber septic tank. In the first inlet (*solids*) chamber, greases and light solids in the water rise to the top of the tank, forming a scum layer, while heavier materials sink to the bottom and form sludge. Anaerobic bacteria do not use oxygen and digest (*break down*) solids in the tank to reduce sludge buildup.

TYPICAL CONCRETE SEPTIC TANK



The treated wastewater flows from the second outlet (*liquid*) chamber to the leachline, or soil absorption area, where it seeps down into the soil. Bacteria trapped in the soils continue treating the wastewater. Every time raw sewage flows into the tank, an equal amount of treated wastewater flows out.

What could go wrong?

Septic System Failure



Ignoring your septic system could cost you thousands of dollars for repair or replacement. If your tank is not pumped regularly, scum and sludge will fill up the tank, overflow into the leachline and plug up the soil. This causes the leachline to fail and the wastewater to rise to the surface of the ground. Failure of a leachline means a new leachline or seepage pit must be constructed with a permit from the County or City Building and Safety Department.

Other factors can also cause septic system failure. Wasting water, or even too many people living in the house, can cause a septic system to fail. Your septic system was designed according to the the number of people living in the home with an average of two people per bedroom. Because the soil can only absorb a limited amount of water, conserving water can help you stay under the daily limit.

This chart shows how much wastewater your tank can process in a 24-hour period:

Bedrooms	Estimated Gallons of Wastewater per Day	Septic Tank Capacity in gallons
1-2	500	750
3	670	1,000
4	800	1,200
5-6	1,000	1,500

Water draining into the leachline from gutters, or even heavy rains, can overload the system and cause it to fail.

DON'T use your toilet and sink as a trash can to dump **non-degradables** (*things that do not dissolve*). Keep things like vegetable trimmings, cooking oils, greases, coffee grounds, cigarette butts, kleenex, paper towels, disposable diapers, and sanitary pads out of your septic tank. Use good quality white toilet paper that breaks up easily when wet. Dyes from colored toilet paper can hurt the bacteria.

DON'T **contaminate the groundwater or harm your septic system by pouring harmful chemicals down the drain or toilet.** Large amounts of cleaning products can kill the good bacteria in your septic tank that treat wastewater. Read the instructions on the labels and use only as directed.

**KEEP THESE MATERIALS
OUT OF YOUR SEPTIC SYSTEM!**



Tips to avoid trouble

DON'T wait until your septic system fails to have your tank pumped. It is cheaper and easier to *prevent* system failure than to correct a failed system or to install a new system. Remember, once the leachline is clogged, cleaning the tank will do little good. You will need a new leaching area.

DON'T waste money on chemical, yeast, bacteria or enzyme additives. These products usually don't prevent problems and could hurt your system in the long run, or even contaminate groundwater. Only regular tank pumpings by professional licensed septic tank pumpers can help.

DON'T destroy an old, failed leachline. It may be used again by letting the old leachline *dry out*, or rest, for three to five years. DEHS recommends installing a diversion valve when your new leachline is built to change the flow of wastewater from the new line to the old line. After the three to five year waiting period, you can release the wastewater to the new line on even-numbered years and to the old line on odd-numbered years. If you let a leaching area rest every other year *and* have your septic tank pumped regularly, the leachline(s) should last the life of your home or building.

DON'T allow anyone to drive, park or pave over any part of the system. Traffic vibration or heavy weight could damage pipes and your seepage pits. The area over the leachline should be left undisturbed with only a mowed grass cover. Keep trees and shrubs away from your septic system area. Their roots could clog or damage your leachline(s).

Health Hazard

Failure of a septic system is a serious health hazard and could threaten the health of your family and neighbors. Children and adults could come in contact with raw (*untreated*) sewage. Pets, insects, rodents, and birds could pick up and carry disease-causing organisms to you and your family. And furthermore, it usually stinks.

Water Contamination

A failed septic system can also contaminate surface waters, such as lakes, rivers and streams, with bacteria, viruses, detergents and other harmful chemicals.

What are warning signs of septic system failure?

The **first sign** of failure is sewage where you don't want it, such as . . .

- sewage running into the tub when you flush the toilet
- sewage rising to the surface of the ground above the

leachline, especially after storms

as well as . . .

- slow draining toilets/drains or toilets that won't flush
- gurgling sounds in pipes and drains
- mushy ground or lush, green grass near septic system area
- strong sewage odors followed by complaints from your neighbors

What can I do?

Important ways to keep your septic system running well.

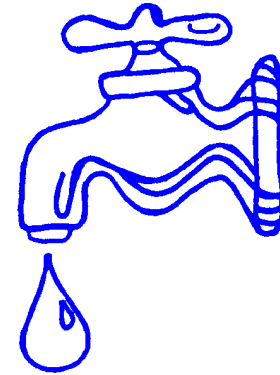
Most important! DO have your tank pumped by a County-licensed septic tank pumper every two to four years. Have both compartments pumped. To see if your tank needs to be pumped, remove the manhole cover at the inlet end (*the end closest to the house*). Use a shovel to push the scum layer away from the side of the tank to estimate its thickness. ***If the scum layer is more than one foot thick, have your tank pumped immediately!*** Replace the manhole cover and wash your hands and shovel. Yearly inspection of the septic tank is strongly recommended. Check your phone book yellow pages for a licensed Septic Tank Pumper.

DO keep a record of all pumpings, inspections, installations and other maintenance. Keep this brochure and use the back page to record this information. This record should remain in the house, even if you move. If you buy a house with a septic system, make sure you get a record and layout from the owner. They are responsible for keeping the records.

DO call your City or County Building and Safety Department if your system fails within five years of the installation date. This could mean your system was not designed, constructed or installed

DO find out where your septic tank and leachline are. Your licensed pumper can help you draw a sketch of the septic system layout, including the location of the manholes, tank, piping and leachline. Remember, pumping your tank or installing a new leach-line will cost more if the pumpers or contractors have to dig and search for the tank or leachline.

DO conserve water. Repair dripping faucets and leaking toilets. Avoid taking long showers and use water saving toilets, shower heads and faucets. Don't leave faucets running for long periods of time. Use your dishwasher or clothes washer only when the machine has a full load. Using your garbage disposal will also fill up your septic tank much faster.



DO use bleach, disinfectants, and drain/toilet bowl cleaners sparingly and according to labels. Take your leftover household hazardous chemicals to a Household Hazardous Waste Collection Center. *For more information on household hazardous waste disposal call (909) 382-5401.*

DO reserve additional land equal to or larger than your present septic system area for future use. This is needed in case the original system fails or wears out. Do not build over the existing system or expansion area.